OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

MANDY'S DESERTION.

By Edna Kingsley Wallace

MRS. HARRIS removed the blue-check apron from her ample form and rolled down her sleeves. Her eyes blinked rapidly and her mouth twitched with a nervous tension further indicated by two bright spots of color in her round cheeks.

"Josiah Harris," quote she, "I ain't goin' to wash one of them dishes till you've split that there kindlin' and piled it up good whar I can get it easy thar in the shed. It is noways fair fer you to go gallivantin' round listenin' to that fool camp-meetin' feller who doesn't support his own lawful wife over to Hillsdale, whilst I'm slavin' here to home—and I won't!" she ended explosively.

What she wouldn't was plain enough to the little man who stood with his finger on the latch, but there was that in his long, obstinate upper lip which overcame the kindliness in the blue eyes, and he said, with an aggravating smile, "What won't ye, Mandy? Won't ye go gallavantin' or won't ye support his"——

"Josiah Harris," retorted his wife hotly, "I've told you what I won't do, and now I'll tell you what I will do—I'll go back home over to Tanuck Falls, and I'll work in the mills—and—and I'll never wash them dishes, never!" she finished, with a burst of tears.

"Jimminy Christmas! Mandy, don't be as foolish as that. I guess it's a pity if a man can't look after his own soul in this here vale of tears." Then he mumbled under his breath, "I presume I can attend to my own business."

Mandy heard nothing but a certain word which was as a glove in her face. "Soul!" she gasped, her scorn struggling with her sobs, "you can look after your precious soul all you've a mind to, but I won't look after your body a mite longer, when you don't do what you'd ought to do. There's them apples rottin' on the ground, that ought to go to the cider mill, and the south field to be tended to, and wood to split, and brush to burn, and you go chasin' that"——

At this juncture, the torrent of Mandy's eloquence was dammed by the slamming of the door—Josiah deeming retreat the wiser and more comfortable part of valor. She sank limply upon a straight-backed kitchen chair, and wept convulsively, immersed in the bitter sweetness of self-pity.

"I won't wash 'em—I won't!" she reiterated again and again. The clock ticked with an effect of carrying her steadily, irresistably into an uncertain future. Dully she looked about the familiar room which had somehow grown alien and unfriendly within this brief space of a half hour. By her own words she had put it out of her life.

But combating the sense of detachment, this strange new lethargy, was her habitual energy of mind and body; and as her intensity of indignation subsided, her inerent tendency to do things that needed to be done reasserted itself. She would be as good as her word; she would go to Tanuck Falls—she would show him!—but first she must tidy up a bit. The dishes she would not wash, for principle's sake; but she must shake the rugs and sweep the floor. When these things were finished, and her fingers itched to attack the pile of breakfast dishes, her glance fell upon the sitting room windows bespattered with last night's rain. Hurrying with nervous energy she got her pail, her hot water, her cloths, and proceeded vigorously to make the windows worthy of the bright October sun streaming through them.

"It's awful bad to wash windows when the sun's on 'em," she murmured apologetically, "but I jest couldn't leave 'em."

She unlocked the sliding doors of the parlor, dusted it with her usual thoroughness, and relocked the doors with a click that startled her into a vivid sense of finality. She filled and trimmed the lamps and as she was replacing the last of them in its bracket on the wall, the clock struck twelve.

"My soul!" she exclaimed aloud, "if here it isn't noon already, and I not ready to go. I wouldn't have Si Harris catch me here—not for this world or any other. To think I've lived with him mor'n twelve years and never seen afore how mean he is. He'll be comin' in soon to get his dinner, I expect, same's usual, and—well, he'll hev to get it—I won't."

Slipping her gray shawl from the peg, she opened the back door and started for the little summerhouse Josiah had begun in an ornamental moment years before, and had finished because he had begun it. "I'll just wait here behind these vines until he has come and gone," she thought, with a lump in her throat, "and then I'll go back and get ready to go." But Josiah came not. Mandy sat immovable, peering through the reddened leaves, but there was neither sound nor motion about the house except when the big mastiff, Budge, barked in sympathy with the excitement of a dog half a mile distant. Deprived of an outlet for her indignant energy, Mandy grew quieter, and the more generous part of her nature responded to the beauty of the day; her vexation was quieted by the large, slow calm of Nature. Presently she arose and wandered back to the house, her intention of leaving it grown hazy. But when she drew near and saw the several indications of Josiah's late straying after false gods—the ungathered apples, the neglected wood-pile—indignation revived within her.

"He hadn't ought to," she murmured fiercely, "and he ain't come home this noon, and I'm goin'."

With fresh resolution she set about getting herself something to eat; after which she carefully washed and put away the dishes she had used. The sacrificial pile remaining from the morning meal she left untouched.

After she had fastened the last hook and eye of her best black dress, she remembered that the lowest bureau drawer was in some disorder by reason of her hasty search a day or two before for some one of its heterogenous contents. That would never do. Down she went on her knees and fingered with housewifely thrift the odds and ends she had been saving against future need. When all was put in order she shut the drawer and, rising stiffly, made her way to the rocking chair by the window. In her hand was a little pile of tiny garments, yellow with years and darkness.

"I don't know as I'd ought to take 'em," she thought dully, "'cause she was his, too, and I guess he thought a lot of her, same as I did."

Conscientiously the clock ticked the minutes into hours, as clocks do, whether their ticking be for joy or sorrow . . . . The shadows lengthened and Mandy did not move.

The red moon rising over the meadows lighted Josiah on his homeward way.

"I'm kinder late, I guess," he muttered, "but I don't care. She'll hev to come to her senses. She's too blim bossy. I didn't want to go to any old meetin' to-day, but I jest wa'n't goin' to take any o' her lip. Anyhow," he chuckled, "Annabel Riggs is ahead 'one doll's cradle. Who'd think one o' them pesky little things would take so long to make. That there tongue o' Mandy's makes me feel jest like pepper on the hot stove does—jest that hot, scrooged up feelin'. I hev been a good husband to her in the main, and—well, mebbe I hev been sort o' mean about this here, but"—here the long upper lip drew down—"let her talk. I don't care." He whistled hard to convince a skeptical universe how indifferent he was, but his footsteps quickened perceptibly as he neared his home and saw that no welcoming light shone forth from its windows. "It's funny Mandy ain't got no light," he thought, with a queer-gone feeling somewhere inside of him.

Meanwhile Mandy, sitting in the dark, irresolute, had seen Budge start off to meet his master. She heard Josiah whistling, and the fact that he could whistle seemed a suggestion of unbelief in her threat of the morning and caused a strong revulsion of feeling.

"He shan't find me here," she thought doggedly, and rose to make her escape through the side door. It was locked and she rememberd that Josiah had the key. She could hear his footsteps going round to the back door. In a moment he would be inside. There was not time for her to get the chain off the seldom-used front door. What should she do? Desperately she glanced back into the bedroom whence she had just come, and which she and Josiah had occupied for so many years. The closet? No, she would smother. Josiah's hand was on the latch. She made a wild dash for the room—and crawled under the bed. This was rather a tight squeeze for a woman of Mandy's portly figure; comfort in such a place of concealment was perhaps questionable, but as she balanced the discomfort of facing Josiah against the possibility of choking to death with a suppressed sneeze or cough, she assured herself that she would far rather make the best she could of the Judgment Day than to encounter Josiah and strike her colors. She had come to her final decision without that weighty consideration regarded as desirable in important matters, and now she must abide by it.

It was his duty to strut gloriously past the window at intervals.

Josiah entered, and stumbling over a chair, groped for a match wherewith to illuminate the situation. The pile of dishes still unwashed told the story, yet he could not believe the evidences of his senses. "Mandy!" he bawled. Silence answered him. "Well, I swan," said Josiah after a minute, perhaps of difficult mental adjustment, "ef she hasn't gone." Then after a moment's pause, "Well, I reckon she'll come back again, pretty soon."

"That I never will," thought Mandy under the bed, forgetting that she was not yet gone. She felt as remote from her home and her husband as though she had journeyed miles from them. It was a strange, unwonted country under the bed.

Josiah pottered about awkwardly, getting himself some cold meat and bread and butter, and presently sat down to the simple meal with Budge's head upon his knee.

"It's mortal queer 'thout Mandy, ain't it, Budge?" Budge wagged his tail enthusiastically. "It ain't so funny, either," pursued Josiah, running his hands into his trousers pockets, and contemplatnig the dog solemnly. Feeling his master's mood, Budge put his head on Josiah's knee, and looked up at him with anxious sympathy. Josiah lapsed into silence and inactivity, leaving his supper untouched. He seemed to be gazing at something that Budge could not see. The dog found that to be clearly a foolish proceeding, and after he had endured it patiently a few moments, after his kind, he made gentle protest by thrusting his nose under his master's arm.

"I guess mebbe you're hungrier than I be," said Josiah, patting the dog's head with one hand as he drew back his chair with the other. Budge replied with a joyous yap, and thereupon made festival with the contents of his master's plate.

"I'm thinkin'," said Josiah, addressing Budge for lack of other audience, "I jest believe I'll fix up that woodpile in the mornin', to s'prise Mandy when she comes back."

Mandy's heart throbbed, and the tears rose in her eyes. She would have given much to cry out, but pride restrained her; he was too sure of her. She wondered how much longer she would be able to repress a sneeze; and in the wonder lay all the anticipatory tragi-comedy of the possible exposure of her absurd predicament. It was the comic element from which her highly wrought nerves shrank. That her tragedy should be made ridiculous seemed intolerable. She could endure anything but that.

Josiah creaked about the kitchen restlessly on his tiptoes; he could not bear to wake the echoes of silence. He resented the rustle of the newspaper he picked up to beguile the time. It was a stupid paper. He would go to bed. He wound the eight-day clock—a performance which might be regarded not absolutely necessary, inasmuch as he had wound it exactly forty-eight hours before, on Sunday night. It was all Mandy could do to restrain her impulse to admonish him of this fact. He tried the windows and locked the back door, still tiptoeing as if there was a sleeping child in the house.

At last he entered the sleeping room and prepared for bed. Awkwardly he pulled down the coverlets, and Mandy held her breath lest she be discovered. With a sigh which might have been attributed either to a feeling that the day was over and oblivion near at hand or to tired resignation to the troubles incident to the lot of sinful man, Josiah climbed into bed. But although he was physically comfortable, he tossed restlessly, and thought with blank reiteration, "She oughtn't to hev taken me up like that. I never thought she'd really go."

During these dull cogitations of Josiah, poor Mandy was aching in every limb and stiff with the chill of the droughty floor. If only she could turn over. Softly and cautiously she raised her considerable bulk when—

"Tarnation, Budge!" shouted Josiah, "get out o' there—I want to get a wink o' sleep, and I dunno as I can with you a-walking off with the hull bed. Get out."

Mandy shrank back terrified. Budge, hearing his name, emerged from his innocent seclusion under the kitchen table, and stealing to the bedside on velvet paws thrust his cold nose upon his master's face.

"Get out of here, I say," yelled that much tired gentleman, and the dog slunk away abashed.

Silence. It was as still as if the world had not yet been made, it seemed to Mandy. The unhappy woman was now beginning to suffer actual pain because of her cramped position and the cold of the frosty October night. Josiah must be asleep by this time. She would be more cautious than before, but she could not stand it another minute; she would slip out, creep softly upstairs to another bed, and get away early in the morning before Josiah was awake. Slowly and cautiously she wriggled toward the outer edge of the bed. But the sound of her movement, slight as it was, aroused Budge to the investigation of its cause, and he came and sat down by the bed, thumping his honest tail by way of encouraging her efforts. Mandy desisted and lay still for a moment, but the mischief was done; Josiah was aroused, and he arose in his wrath.

"You blim dog!" he muttered fiercely, "I'll teach you to fool 'round in the middle of the night." With this Josiah leaped out of bed with the bloodthirsty intention of abolishing Budge from the category of oppressors of the downtrodden. One bare foot encountered Mandy's outstretched hand.

"Sufferin' Cæsar," he exclaimed, "what was that?"

"Only me, Josiah," said a weak voice of capitulation.

"Mandy Harris! What in thunderation you doin' under the bed?"

He dragged her forth. There were matches on the stand by the bed, and he struck one.

"Your best clothes," he said mechanically.

"Yes," said Mandy, sobbing; "I was goin', and you come home so sudden I didn't have time and I'm so cold." Her teeth were chattering. Josiah pulled the counterpane off the bed, and sitting down on the floor by Mandy wrapped it about them both. With her head on his shoulder and his arm around her, Mandy sobbed out the hurt that was in her. When she had grown a little quieter, Josiah suddenly gave vent to something between a snort and a chuckle. "We might as well set on the bed, I guess," he said, his shoulders heaving. Mandy began to giggle hysterically, and in less than a minute they were shouting with laughter.

"Seems to be clearing up after the shower," observed Josiah, when he could get his breath.

"Si," said Mandy suddenly, "what time is it?"

Josiah struck another match, and looked at his watch. "Jest 'leven o'clock, Mandymine," he answered, slipping naturally into the pet name of their courting days.

"Well, then I'm going to wash them dishes," announced Mandy energetically, "and I reckon mebbe I'll hev a bite to eat."

"I'll wipe," said Josiah. And later, as he polished a coffee cup, he observed carelessly, "Say, Mandy, where did you say you wanted them kindlin's put?"

A Triangular Situation

By Huntley Murray.

I KNEW that her name was Molly because she looked as if that were her name, and I believe in the fitness of things. But I have no legal evidence. At Youngs' the deliberate amenities are replaced by a species of step-lively-please formality, incisive and inflexible, and on those rare occasions when any of her colleagues had occasion to address Molly by name, one heard only "Miss——" with three s's and a splash of East Side consonants. Molly was Irish—black Irish. She was superbly big, with a pair of confident shoulders, and the heavy grace of a performing tiger. She twisted her weight of dusky, bronze-glinted hair into a careless knot, instead of the usual side-entrance pompadour; her eyes, blue and long fringed, laughed under level brows; and her nose expressed infinite aspiration, after the school of the Gothic rather than the finished repose of classic architecture. The other waitresses said: "Whattschures?" in the tones of the Respectable Working Lady; in contrast wherewith Molly's round, deep-keyed "Whath-r-r ye goin' to have?" was aderable.

There are many Youngs' in New York (you find little printed lists of them on the left as you go out of the door, opposite the cigar-lighter) and I know them all, and it does not matter which is the scene of this tale—which brings me logically to the statement that I think there must always have been the Policeman. It was his duty to strut gloriously past the window at intervals; and the well-being of the municipality of Greater New York demanded that he do this at such times as Molly was procuring griddle cakes from the superheated plateau in the extreme foreground. He did not look in, on these occasions—at least it was some weeks before I could decide whether he did or not. So I knew that he was a man, and made opportunity to talk with him a few words now and then at odd hours, for the improvement of my understanding—as Adam was permitted to do with the Archangel. Once, in the ripeness of the acquaintance, I turned the talk toward perambulators and area-ways and so, cautiously, in the direction of diminishing return. And I thought the more of him for meeting me honestly with quaintly relished reminiscences, unsuspicious—but not the shadow of a word of Molly. He understood what I had seen well enough too—but he was too much of a man to invite me into the holiness and too much of a gentleman to feel any need of snubbing me. On duty, his name must have been at least Roundsman Alysius O'Kearney. But since one off night when I saw him going into an A. F. O. H. ball with Molly I have suspected that his real name was Tim.

Molly had her troubles all this time. A big, buoyant personality becomes heroic in the face of calamity and is petulant against continuous annoyance. It is told of a certain Io, who was such a girl as evil magic might transform into a heifer, that her torment was not the fangs of wolves, but the nagging of a gadfly. The work was a strain to begin with, especially in summer. For at Youngs', during rush hours, they also serve who at other times only stand and wait. And it is not good for a woman to be upon her feet all day long. Then, there was the constant spite of women a shade above Molly's own class, women perpetually fretted with small cares, women in vegetable hats whose thin children said "Hanh?" when they did not hear. Then the Head Waitress, (if that be her proper title), hated Molly for being pretty and more for being unworried. I could hardly blame her, poor thing; for it is hard, being grown hateful, not to hate. And the blood in the Head Waitress was weak lemonade, and she had no eyebrows, and nobody loved her. Besides, a woman in power over women is almost always either a Cleopatra or a Gorgon. It maddened the Head Waitress to see Molly glanced after evilly by men. Molly herself was not much disturbed by the notice she attracted. She accepted it carelessly as tribute or disregarded it as unmeaning—except in the case of the Barber.

The Barber was of those who emerge from nonenity into nuisance. He was a little, lithe, green-chinned Italian, with hair something between a plaster and a pompadour, a reminiscent white waistcoat, and a professional aroma. He would look sidelong at Molly, the bluish whites of his eyes glistening under lowered lids; and when she had passed, would shrug himself erect in his chair and cast about among the men present for a congratulating smile. The Latin countries breed many men of his type They lean subtly against a lady in a crowded car, careful not to give overt offence. They confide intimately in chance acquaintances; with a little encouragement, they will show you letters.

When I began to notice the Barber, he was coming regularly noon and evening, and sitting as often as possible at Molly's table. For some time thereafter he existed in Molly's consciousness as One-Pork-and-New-York-Lettuced-Iced-Coffee. With the other girls he did better, and before long was calling two or three of them by name and finding his orders anticipated. He assumed obviously the air of an old customer, and stopped a moment on slack days to chat, toothpick in mouth, with the Head Waitress. But Molly was a constant irritation to his self-complacency. He spoke to her persistently, followed her constantly with his eyes, and smirked if she glanced his way. Once it was my fate to sit next to him.

"Pretty swell little woman, that, eh, what?" he remarked, pointing at Molly with his fork.

"I never noticed," I said.

"Yes, sir," pursued the Barber, putting down the fork and twisting his mustache. "She is certainly a first-class article. I'd leave home for that all right, all right."

"You know your own mind," I answered, and so departed unfed and unchristian.

Molly had no nerves. If she had she would have left half way through the summer, as did one or two others. But the regularity of small irritation reached her. It was a hot, muggy season, and I think that she had other cares and stresses in those days of which I saw only effects. The Barber grew bolder and more evident. The other girls buzzed and snickered—how much they teased her outright I could only guess. And the Head Waitress, as August went on, grew no less than malignant, and flicked the girl with a feline phrase a dozen times daily. Molly was as cool and vital and merry as ever. But she promoted the Barber mentally to the rank of Pestiferous Insect; and I noticed that she watched for his coming and sighed with relief at his departure. Then she would give her shoulders a shake and dive into her work with a queer half-smile. The Barber's efforts to draw a response from her succeeded at last, one steaming noon when men were lunching on cold rice and iced tea, in their shirt sleeves, handkerchiefs inside collars.

"Say," he said for the fourth time, as Molly paused a moment near by, "what time do you get off work?"

Molly turned deliberately.

"Just about that same hour," she said with emphasis "that you'll be graftin' a free lunch away on River Street, Hoboken."

The crowded table grinned in pairs, and a red-headed youth next the wall said, "Ah, haw-haw," and choked. The Barber was on his mettle.

"Ain't she the coy one?" he remarked, to whom it might concern. Then, as Molly returned: "Hey? Say? Go on, tell me. When do you"——

"Spaghetti," said Molly. "Giva-da-monk-a-banann."

I embraced a plumber who sat next to me. The barber turned yellowish and tried to smile.

"Butter-cakes ready, five!" shrilled the Head Waitress from the window. And the incident was closed. Still, of course, Molly had made a bad mistake. The Barber had, doubtless, read in the Sunday papers that hate is closely akin to love. He gained by her open antagonism. He showed a certain real courage in facing rebuff. And Molly soon tired of retort, hating herself vaguely for having consented to hate him. One day the Barber tied a cheap bracelet into his napkin. Molly left it at the desk. But, in her blindness, she only half lied. It was the Barber who had forgotten the thing accidentally. He, of course, disclaimed ownership. So Molly smarted under the imputation of a vulgar trick to gain his acquaintance. The Head Waitress knew well enough that this charge was flimsy and absurd; but she admired the Barber herself—clutchingly. He was young and a man, and gave her the great gift of notice. Let me say, in justice, that he was as obviously clean and graceful as a cat. When he ate onions, he always nibbled Sen-Sen afterward. The frustrate matron rankled in the Head Waitress and she used her opportunity. The Barber repeated his manœuvre from time to time and Molly took the trash. She gave it away, when she could, to the other girls—which was futile. I fail to understand why she had not, long before, told the Policeman the whole story, but there may have been twenty reasons. Molly was not wise, but she was probably woman enough to know how strangely worship and suspicion are interwoven among the young tendrils of a man's love. At any rate, she endured in reckless silence, and the situation grew acute.

It was on a Saturday evening that Frank came with me to Youngs'. Because it was after seven, and a half-holiday, the place was nearly empty; and we sat nearest the door for the cool.

The Barber, at table five, was twisting his mustache and smiling. When he smiled the overripe lips flattened into a wide, straight band, and the scorn lines from lip to nostril curved and grew deep. Molly brought him his supper and he spoke to her. She turned away quickly. He called her back and amended his order. As she passed us I noticed one small, sharp tooth catching over the corner of her underlip. Frank was glowering at the Barber, and made a certain observation, for which it is enough to say that I honor him.

Molly returned, bearing a tall glass of iced coffee. As she leaned over to set it at his right, the Barber caught her free hand, pulled her down, and half whispered something into her ear.

I think I said that Molly was Irish. She straightened her sturdy back, and for one part of a second stood, shivering, and grinned at her abomination—the fighting-smile of her terrible race. Then, as the artist of the soda fountain curves the long stream between glass and shaker, the brown stream of cold coffee curved spattering upon the Barber's elaborate head. The cracked ice tinkled onto the tiled floor. With one swift sweep Molly tucked the dripping head firmly under her arm, while with the other hand she snatched the yellow slab of butter from beneath its ice-block in the center of the table. And as the small boy, dominant, implacable, scrubs with snow the weeping face of his overborne antagonist, even so did this woman of Erin with the butter undo her enemy—and more also.

It was over before you could push back your chair. The Barber, released, toppled sidelong among the wreckage. In the paralyzed instant that follows calamity, Molly stood astonished, her buttery hands at her tumbling hair. Then the irrepressible Irish sense of humor broke forth. She gurgled across the hush:

"Hot towel, sir?"

After that, the Deluge. I am sorry that I do not understand spoken Italian. The Barber made a sort of blind rush, and was collared by Frank and me—in which virtuous act we ruined our clothes. The waitresses screamed and scuttled henlike, the Manager, Cashier, Head Waitress and Griddle-Cake Man rushed clamorous from the front, and the mysterious regions to the rear belched forth large, hot people and clouds of culinary steam. Molly lifted up her voice and wept—the heart-broken, wondering cry of a hurt child. And through the din of complex recriminations clove the blue figure of Roundsman Aloysius O'Kearney.

"What the devil's goin' on here?" he roared, accumulating me and the Barber, and smiting our heads together with energy.

The ensuing cloudburst of polyphonic explanation was not enlightening.

"Assaulted ye, did she, ye frog-eatin' Dago? Phwat for?" His eye turned from Molly, who had stopped crying, to the Head Waitress and Manager. "Ye're both witnesses?" I'll take your names." He was thinking hard. I squirmed gently and, with a preoccupied recognition, he released me. Then he reached for his night-stick. "The Dago's drunk, anyway."

Babel broke out afresh.

"I'll run yez in," announced the officer to Molly. "Ye'll come with me quietly, understand." He touched her shoulder, turned, and shook the spluttering Italian into a limp mass. "I'll run yez both in. Naw, I don't want no hurry-up wagon. I know my business. Kim out of that! I understand, I understand—ye can tell all that to the Justice, in the morning. Out o' the road there! Skidoo!

He shouldered through the crowd at the door and down the street, protecting Molly with one arm and half dragging the now wholly frantic Barber. Molly wore a demurely expectant expression as the three turned into a dark side street which does not lead in the direction of the station house.

Next day, meeting the Policeman, by good fortune, I ventured to inquire after the Barber.

"They held what was left of him on three counts—public nuisance, dhrunk and disordherly an' resistin' an' beatin' an officer," said Roundsman Aloysius O'Kearney.

"By the way," I added, "Highland Place wasn't quite your nearest way to the station, was it?"

"Did you never hear, sorr," suggested Tim, "that the longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home?"

And Molly? Oh, well, of course.